



“Denn wir sind anders”: “Zonenkinder” in the Federal Republic

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The period since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany has seen a dramatic flowering of literary talent from the old East. Over the past few years, following a trail blazed by authors such as Thomas Brussig and Ingo Schulze, a new group of younger authors has also emerged, whose autobiographical work has been striking for its apparent ambivalence about the *Wende*. While this reaction may not constitute *Ostalgie*, it remains sceptical of life in the new Germany. This article explores debut publications by Jana Simon, Jana Hensel and Claudia Rusch, all members of the so-called “Zonenkinder” group. It traces their responses to the way in which they feel their childhood has been stolen from them with the *Abwicklung* of the GDR. This article will elucidate how these authors are now joining the debate about the transformation process, as representatives of this generation that was largely mute during the *Wende*.

Following the *Literaturstreit* which engulfed German culture in the 1990s and posed questions as to what, if anything, should be the GDR’s literary legacy in the new Germany, it is striking that a vibrant new literature has emerged in the twenty-first century from a generation born into the GDR in the early 1970s. They were in their mid- to late-teens as the Wall fell and their experiences of the rapid socio-political changes that followed have left them with a unique perspective on the present, caught in a tension between past and future. This particular ‘neue deutsche Welle’ was anticipated in the mid-1990s by the success of authors such as Thomas Brussig and Ingo Schulze, whose work has been the subject of much critical and academic scrutiny in recent years.¹ Where Brussig (b. 1965) and Schulze (b. 1962) were able to observe events from the relative stability of young adulthood, delivering sensitive depictions of the *Wende* and its aftermath from the perspective of greater maturity, by contrast the new generation of “Zonenkinder” – a phrase coined by one of these new authors, Jana Hensel – were overwhelmed in the midst of their formative years. As a result, the world changing almost overnight was understandably much more disorientating for them. Having scarcely found their feet in the GDR, they were suddenly confronted with new patterns of behaviour, new sets of rules, all of which at first seemed to offer promise. At the turn of the millennium, it seems that some of the “Zonenkinder” were resolved to tackle the identity crisis the *Wende* had created.

¹ Brussig’s reputation was established by the successful novels *Helden wie wir* (1995) and *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999), whilst Schulze came to prominence with *Simple Stories* (1998).

In Frank Rothe, Falko Hennig and Jakob Hein – son of Christoph – this generation has spawned authors with a picaresque eye to match that of Brussig. In his debut novel *Mondbad* (2002), Rothe tells the story of Max, the self-professed “König des Wassers” who believes himself to be stranded on the earth’s surface in Prenzlauer Berg amongst the “Läufer”, an almost Kafkaesque metaphor of alienation in contemporary east Berlin. By contrast, both Hennig and Hein take an irreverent look at their own GDR childhoods, with the former documenting in the novel *Alles nur geklaut* (1998) his severe kleptomania and the problems this causes, especially given his passion for books, whilst the latter provides often hilarious, sometimes absurd, vignettes in *Mein erstes T-Shirt* (2001), a collection of short prose pieces that shed light on the GDR *Alltag*. Although each of these texts is shot through with an autobiographical dimension, it is far safer to stand well back and admire them as personal experiences quite deliberately refracted through fiction. But it is the greater personal authenticity of work by three other authors to which our attention will be drawn here, namely Jana Simon (b. 1972), Jana Hensel (b. 1976) and Claudia Rusch (b. 1971). Of course, every autobiographical literary statement is to a certain extent a fiction, in the way the material is selected and structured, but also on account of the inevitable frailty of human memory as an unimpeachably authoritative source.² Whilst the authenticity of the three accounts under scrutiny here might, therefore, be challenged, taken together the texts nevertheless provide valuable, and to a great degree mutually corroborative, insights into the salient psychological issues, even if the approaches and precise details recorded differ in each case. By comparing and contrasting these texts, what emerges is a description of the psychological adjustments required of this generation after 1989, “denn wir sind anders”, as the title of Simon’s text puts it.

That Jana Simon was concerned about questions of identity in the new Germany is evident from the title of the collection of essays she co-edited in 2000. *Das Buch der Unterschiede: Warum die Einheit keine ist* comprises twenty-three fascinating contributions by young people from East and West which examine the extent to which the ‘Mauer im Kopf’ has remained for this generation. Simon’s own essay articulates the precise nature of the problem for a former East German in the new Germany:

² For a more searching examination of the nature of autobiographical writing, see Paul John Eakin’s excellent study *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*.

Auch bei der Zeitung, für die ich schreibe, bin ich für ‘den anderen Blick’ zuständig. Der andere Blick – was ist das? Ich lebe seit zehn Jahren im Westen, habe ich den überhaupt noch? Meine West-Kollegen setzen ganz selbstverständlich eine eigene DDR-Identität voraus, die ich nie dachte zu besitzen. Im Gegenteil. Ich überlege heute noch oft, wo ich hingehöre. Bin ich eine Ostlerin? Eine westliche Ostlerin oder eine östliche Westlerin? Die Grenzen haben sich verschoben. Ich weiß es nicht mehr. Ich gehöre wie schon vor der Wende nirgendwohin, habe ich mich irgendwo zwischen den Systemen verirrt. Erst durch das Bemerkten meiner Andersartigkeit ist für mich im nachhinein so etwas wie eine Ostidentität entstanden. (Simon et al. 2000: 27)

In her full-length debut, *Denn wir sind anders: Die Geschichte des Felix S.*, a biography of her first serious boyfriend, Simon examines how this same identity crisis tragically afflicted Felix. She painstakingly reconstructs his life, making use of her own personal reflections on their friendship together with interviews with his family and friends. Although his family background is anything other than typical – his grandparents were refugees from South African apartheid and a complementary thread in the book tells their remarkable story – Simon stresses that her friend was “ein echtes Kind der DDR” (Simon 2001: 44). In describing the story of Felix’s disorientation after the *Wende*, which led to his fateful involvement in the twilight world of football hooliganism and drug-dealing in Berlin, she is simultaneously illustrating the universal problems that a perceived “Andersartigkeit” has caused her generation, as they struggled to find themselves in a radically altered environment.

The tragedy is that Felix was unable to reconcile himself to the changes as successfully as Simon. Whereas she went to study in London and Moscow, he remained in Berlin, even moving out of the increasingly fashionable Prenzlauer Berg to the grimier surroundings of Ostkreuz, “eine düstere Gegend” where everything “ans Ostberlin der achtziger Jahre [erinnerte]” (Simon 2001: 99). The hooligan scene is thus depicted as an extremely retrogressive one, where individuals were “irgendwie gestrandet” (Simon 2001: 82) – an image that recalls the predicament of the protagonist in Frank Rothe’s *Mondbad*. The attitudes Simon describes as characteristic of this milieu are suggestive of an extreme form of *Ostalgie* that Felix was unable to shake off. It was here he hoped to realise his “große[n] Traum, irgendwo richtig dazuzugehören” (Simon 2001: 117). Yet for all his mastery of martial arts and fearlessness in the face of physical violence, Felix emerges in Simon’s sensitive portrait as a vulnerable and naïve character, prone to exploitation by some of the unscrupulous individuals with whom he spent much of his time.

Unsurprisingly, he was set up by an acquaintance and rather harshly imprisoned for nine months for drug dealing. The experience damaged an already fragile sense of self, and there is a disturbing inevitability about his subsequent suicide that haunts Simon.

The book’s affecting prologue prepares us for this climax, so our attention is drawn to the psychological problems faced by the subject of the biography. Even though the precise details dictate that Felix’s fate can hardly be deemed representative of the generation as a whole, his experiences are presented all the same as symptomatic of a wider malaise afflicting the “Zwischengeneration” to which the biographer belongs. Due to the fundamental reconfiguration of identity demanded of them, they suffer from an innate fragility that makes them susceptible, perhaps, to introspection and unease. At times in *Denn wir sind anders*, this spills over into resentment at the identity imposed on them by those from the old *Bundesländer* because of the “andere[n] Blick” on society they supposedly possess as *Ossis*.

One finds the same irritation at such stereotyping in Jana Hensel’s *Zonenkinder*, which is a memoir dealing with her childhood in the GDR and the events surrounding the *Wende*. Whereas Simon predominantly uses the life and death of her friend as a case study for her generation, Hensel brings her own life into focus, outlining the contours of a childhood begun under socialism and completed in the new Federal Republic: in this respect, being four years younger than Simon possibly adds to the problems she faced. Apparently influenced by Wolfgang Illies’s *Generation Golf*, she examines the minutiae of everyday life for youngsters in the GDR by arranging her material in thematic chapters on aspects such as education, home life, friendships, sport and consumer goods. Her text makes extensive use of photographs, cartoons and other documents, thereby recuperating symbols from a lost land so that one might more usefully describe her book as a social history rather than an attempted autobiography.³ Despite the personal nature of much of what she relates, Hensel tends to favour the perspective of the third person plural. Indeed, her adoption of ‘wir’ provoked a mixed response to the book, and many critics accused her of tumbling into

³ Konrad Jarausch explains how the “notion of a collective personality describes a feeling of belonging to a larger community by sharing its language, history, and purpose, which are justified and held together by a store of cultural myths and symbols” (Jarausch 1997: 5). In this context, one might compare Hensel’s salvaging of GDR symbols with the highly

generalisation or cliché, whilst other commentators understandably challenged how representative her experience was.⁴ One should not view Hensel's text as the definitive record of this generation by any means – although one must note that her term “Zonenkinder” has now stuck – and if it provokes responses from others, then it is fulfilling an important role in the debate about this generation's position in the new Germany and the validity of their experience.

It is certainly true that Hensel is much more convincing when focusing on her own specific experiences, but her text as a whole does still succeed in lifting the lid on what it was like to grow up in the GDR, drawing valuable support from the texts by Jana Simon and Claudia Rusch in this respect. In particular, *Zonenkinder* affords an insight into how this childhood could be normal in so many facets, whilst being simultaneously distorted by the inevitable ideological dimension of totalitarianism:

Alle sollten sich auf mich verlassen können. Ich war einer der jüngsten Staatsbürger der jungen DDR und sollte den Sozialismus weiterbringen, damit er vielleicht doch noch, eines fernen Tages, zum Kommunismus würde. [...] Auch ich musste meinen Mann stehen und, notfalls mit der Waffe in der Hand, verhindern helfen, dass die imperialistische Gefahr sich weiter ausbreitete. (Hensel 2002: 85-6)

Whilst there is implicit criticism in the text of the ways in which the political impinged on the private in the GDR, she is similarly unhappy about some of the changes since the *Wende*, which appear equally political and totalising in nature. Here too, Simon and Rusch corroborate much of her argument with their own accounts.

It is the physical changes in her hometown of Leipzig that seem to perturb Hensel most of all. She returns to the transformation of her *Heimat* at regular intervals throughout *Zonenkinder*, remarking on how the reconstruction of the city is starting to eradicate her memories. That the name of her home bus-stop has changed to Moritzhof is thus presented as deeply disorientating. She had loved the original name, Watestraße, that had accompanied her through childhood “weil ich mir nicht erklären konnte, was er bedeutete” (Hensel 2002: 36), underlining that her dismay is an intensely personal one. Behind the apparent triviality of this new appellation, there lies a deeper psychological significance for those like Hensel who feel that their childhood is being eroded in this way: “Eine Erinnerung nach der anderen, ein Ort

successful films *Sonnenallee* (1999) and *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003), which have recently ignited interest internationally in the GDR, and its distinct ‘personality’.

nach dem anderen ging so verloren” (Hensel 2002: 31).⁵ Jana Simon touches on the same issue in *Denn wir sind anders*. Pacing the streets of Berlin after Felix’s funeral, she feels that with her friend’s passing, the past has truly been *abgewickelt*:

Sie erinnert sich heute oft an Dinge, die sie zusammen erlebt haben. An die Clubs, wo sie waren, die es heute nicht mehr gibt, an ihre Schulen, die jetzt anders heißen, an Johannisthal, ihre Jugend, die verschwunden ist. Sein Weggang kommt ihr vor wie ein Zeichen, dass diese Zeiten nun endgültig vorbei sind. Gestorben. Felix war noch einer von den alten Freunden, einer von denen, an denen sie hing, weil sie mit ihnen ein untergegangenes Land, ein untergegangenes Leben teilte. An die sie immer dachte, wenn sie bestimmte Lieder hörte oder durch bestimmte Gegenden Berlins lief. Die ganze Stadt hatte sich nun verändert. Alles anders, alles weg. Die Freunde von früher waren die Erinnerungen, waren die letzte Verbindung zur Vergangenheit. Nur deshalb lebte Ostberlin weiter. Manchmal. Was, wenn auch sie gingen?

Es ist vorbei. Ostberlin gibt es nicht mehr. (Simon 2001: 244-5)

The motivation for their respective accounts is made explicit in this apparent lament for the disappearance of the world they knew as children, and with it a stable foundation upon which to construct the new identity demanded of them. They had barely had time to lay down roots, before these very roots were torn up. As Hensel remarks: “Man lernt die Dinge eben erst dann zu schätzen, wenn sie verschwunden sind” (Hensel 2002: 36). This is a common enough lament, to be sure, especially for many teenagers who have to cope with a change in circumstances. But for the “Zonenkinder”, whose environment changed so dramatically in almost every aspect, the disappearance of familiar surroundings must have been understandably bewildering. Moreover, they were given no choice in the matter of ratifying these changes democratically, being a generation too young to vote in the election of March 1990. It would only be much later that the true impact of these changes would be felt.

If the generation immediately before the “Zonenkinder” were seen as “hineingeboren” in the GDR, to use Uwe Kolbe’s famous phrase (see Emmerich 1996: 404), then they themselves might be seen as ‘herausgerutscht’. In fact, Hensel employs a much more caustic physical metaphor than that to underline the disconcerting, dizzying effects of the socio-political upheaval they witnessed:

Die Wende traf uns wie ins Mark. [...] Sie fuhr uns in die Knochen und machte, dass sich alles um uns drehte. Wir waren zu jung, um zu verstehen, was vor sich ging, und

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the reception accorded Hensel’s text, see Tom Kraushaar’s *Die Zonenkinder und Wir* (2004).

⁵ Welsh, Pickel and Rosenberg have examined the debate in Berlin about the changes to street names (Welsh et al. 1997: 129f).

zu alt, um wegzusehen, und wurden unserer Kindheitswelt entrissen, bevor wir wussten, dass es so etwas überhaupt gab. [...] Eine Generation entstand im Verschwinden. (Hensel 2002: 160)

With the *Abwicklung* of their childhood, Hensel underlines that a keystone of identity formation has been ripped from them. They appear to be another “Generation ohne Biographie”, to borrow Sigrid Damm’s bitter definition of her own generation (1988: 247). The likes of Simon and Hensel were forced to adapt to the new democratic environment of the Federal Republic. Yet they remained plagued by the uncertainty about what, if anything, could be retained from the GDR – a view shared by many eastern Germans in the post-*Wende* period. Trapped between innocence and experience, this generation is turned by the *Wende* into “AufstiegsKinder [...], die plötzlich aus dem Nirgendwo kamen und denen von allen Seiten eingeflüstert wurde, wo sie hinzuwollen hatten” (Hensel 2002: 72).

But are they truly a generation from nowhere? Are they not in truth a generation with at least *two* biographies? As we have seen, Simon ponders whether she is “eine westliche Ostlerin oder eine östliche Westlerin” in her contribution to *Das Buch der Unterschiede*, before reiterating in *Denn wir sind anders* that her generation were “schließlich [...] alle Kinder des Westens, die nur im Osten aufwuchsen, vorübergehend” (Simon 2001: 42). Therein lies the paradox that defines this group. They were not fully at home in the GDR, exposed as they were not only to the pressure to conform to a dogmatic socialist template that they mostly rejected, or at best tolerated, but also to western influences through television and radio. But neither are they wholly at ease in the new Federal Republic; at least, not yet. The accounts of both Hensel and Simon illustrate the special nature of this identity crisis which finds them caught between both sides, in a no-man’s-land, a “Zwischengeneration” afflicted by the impression “nirgendwo ganz dazugehören” (Hensel 2002: 160). To compound this situation still further, they are forced to contend with those who do not allow them to decide for themselves how to lead their lives since they come from the losing side. As Hensel observes: “Wir waren die Söhne und Töchter der Verlierer, von den Gewinnern als Proletarier bespöttelt, mit dem Geruch von Totalitarismus und Arbeitsscheu behaftet” (Hensel 2002: 73). It is a stigma they must endure, and it is shown to be debilitating on occasion.

Nevertheless, for all their problems, Hensel and Simon both acknowledge too that they have been better able to exploit the new opportunities than their parents, who, as Simon points out, have had trouble “die neue Gesellschaft zu verstehen” and have attempted “verzweifelt [...], ihrem vergangenen Leben einen Wert und einen Sinn zu geben” (Simon 2001: 50). The “Zonenkinder” have been able to ponder this same dilemma by travelling the world, broadening horizons once curbed by the GDR and exploring the avenues open to them to forge a new identity. That each of them has built a career in the new Germany, the success of which is evinced by the very texts under scrutiny here, reinforces the extent to which they have begun to adjust, irrespective of the innate problems. But as Simon’s description of the fate of Felix attests, the transition has come at a cost. Indeed, despite economic or professional progress in the new Germany, reunification ‘thus far [...] has, however, not led to a reevaluation of the distortions and elisions of the postwar political polarization’ (Welsh et al. 1997: 124). The successes of some should not deflect away from a more nuanced appreciation of this generation’s situation as a whole, where not everyone has been able to adapt so seamlessly to the transformation.

Claudia Rusch’s autobiography, *Meine freie deutsche Jugend* (2003), underscores how not all the “Zonenkinder” had broadly similar experiences. The daughter of a human rights campaigner, who spent time after her divorce living with Robert Havemann, Rusch grew up under the gaze of the Stasi, underlining the irony inherent in the title of her book; her childhood was anything but free. After the melancholy escapism of the opening chapter, “Die Schwedenfähre”, which describes how Sweden seemed like “ein verwunschener Platz” (Rusch 2003: 9) to a young girl growing up on the Baltic coast – thereby echoing the theme of escape that underpins Andersch’s *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund* – Rusch wrings considerable humour from her childhood ignorance in the following chapter, “Die Stasi hinter der Küchenspüle”:

Im Hause Havemann sprach man nicht von Stasi, sondern von Kakerlaken, wenn die Posten vor dem Haus oder in den Autos gemeint waren.

Und weil das so war, wurde ich groß, ohne zu ahnen, was Kakerlaken wirklich sind. Natürlich wusste ich, dass es Küchenschaben gibt, aber ich hatte keinen Schimmer, dass man sie Kakerlaken nennt. [...] Ich dachte, Kakerlaken sei der gängige Begriff für das Fußvolk der Stasi. [...] Klingt ja auch ein bisschen russisch... (Rusch 2003: 17)

When, as a 16-year-old, she visited a boyfriend in East Berlin, she embarrassed herself by her reaction to his warning that he had “Kakerlaken” behind the kitchen

sink. Whilst Rusch is able to laugh at the memory now, her account reminds us that for many people the GDR was no laughing matter. The threat and oppression which cast long shadows over her formative years are never far from the surface in the opening chapters, and one is fearful for the little girl when she starts telling Honecker jokes on the S-Bahn while sat on the knee of a policeman. She is saved by her mother's swift intervention, but it is a salutary warning to the seven-year-old girl of the potential ramifications of such naivety: "Ich war, im Rahmen des Möglichen, darauf vorbereitet worden, dass meine Mutter und ihre Freunde plötzlich weg sein könnten, im Knast verschwunden oder sonstwohin verschleppt" (Rusch 2003: 27).

The State's interference, directly or indirectly, in the lives of Rusch and her family punctuates her text. She recounts, for example, how her mother's burgeoning relationship with a young Italian communist, an admirer of Havemann, was blocked by the Stasi who intercepted his letters and ultimately refused him an entrance visa. More chillingly still, Rusch's grandfather, "ein Genosse und Vorzeigekader" (Rusch 2003: 141), was imprisoned by the MfS in Rostock for writing letters to the West Berlin radio station, RIAS, after he grew disillusioned by the GDR's stagnation and the authorities' refusal to listen to his concerns :

Von seiner Zelle konnte man das Meer nicht sehen. Sie hatte keine Fenster. Er verließ sie erst später als Leichnam. Der Tod meines Großvaters wird für immer im Dunkeln bleiben. (Rusch 2003: 141)

She herself was under the constant threat of having her schooling blocked. During the 'swords to ploughshares' initiative, the ten-year-old Rusch was denounced as a *Klassenfeind* by her teacher for wearing the controversial symbol; and were it not for the support of her sympathetic headteacher, who recognised Rusch's evident academic ability, she would not have been able to study for her *Abitur*. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Rusch sheds no tears for the collapse of the SED. Yet, what is striking in *Meine freie deutsche Jugend* is how desperately during her childhood Rusch longed simply to blend into the crowd in the GDR:

Ich gehörte zu einem exklusiven Club, aber manchmal wäre ich gern angepasster DDR-Durchschnitt gewesen. Mit Eltern in der Partei, FDGB-Urlaub in Kühlungsborn und einer Dreizimmerwohnung in Marzahn. Ohne Geheimnisse. Einfach in der Menge verschwinden. (Rusch 2003: 35)

A childhood affected by such tensions unsurprisingly took its toll, and so she was determined to take part in the *Jugendweihe*, even though it felt as if she were

committing perjury by doing so. As an “Außenseiterkind”, she muses that she alone grasped the political import of the ceremony “denn der Treueschwur mit seinem überhöhten Pathos reihte sich ein in die alltägliche Schizophrenie im Osten” (Rusch 2003: 49-50). Like Hensel, Rusch underlines the essentially vapid nature of this event: “Das Gelöbnis spielte keine Rolle – entscheidend waren das Fest und die Geschenke” (Rusch 2003: 50). Nevertheless, it was significant for her psychologically. It represented a fleeting chance for relative normality, to acquire a GDR identity like everyone else, to conform.

By virtue of her endeavours to be as normal a GDR citizen as her family circumstances would allow, the *Wende* was initially as disorientating for Rusch as for Simon and Hensel. But where her contemporaries make no explicit defence of the GDR, it comes as something of a surprise that it is Rusch who is categorical in her belief in 1989 that reunification “passte nicht in meinen Plan”:

Ich glaubte tapfer an eine eigenständige DDR. Der Gedanke an *ein* Deutschland war mir fremd. Ich hatte zu Hause gelernt, dass die DDR, trotz Stalinismus und Volksverdummung, von den Grundlagen her der bessere deutsche Staat sei. Es wäre unsere Aufgabe, ihn zu reformieren und auf den richtigen Weg zu bringen. Darum blieben wir hier, das war der Grund, warum wir nicht in den Westen gingen. (Rusch 2003: 75)

On her first trip to Kreuzberg, faced with a dazzling choice of drinks in a bar, she realises that the bewilderment she feels ironically marks her indeed as “ein ganz normales DDR-Kind” (Rusch 2003: 78) – at the moment of the GDR’s dissolution, she finally blends in. Yet the abiding impression is that Rusch quickly adapts to this new world, arguably more seamlessly than either Simon or Hensel manage. Rusch reveals that she had resolved to escape the GDR long before the fall of the Wall by marrying a Westerner, even though it would have meant turning her back on her family to do so. The chapter “Der Freispruch”, which deals with such difficult decisions, provides the best explanation why it is Rusch who adjusted most easily to the new environment. Despite the persecution which marked her formative years, her resolve to sacrifice her family for freedom, and the terrible guilt this unleashed, represents for her the most damaging impact of the GDR; that the *Wende* obviated the need to escape fills her with overwhelming relief. The relative ease of her acclimatisation to freedom after the *Wende* is symbolised by the way she claims to have successfully navigated her way through Paris without a map in the final chapter:

Ich hatte den Drachen besiegt. Ganz alleine, ohne Stadtplan, hatte ich in meinem rotem Skoda eine kleine Bar im Pariser Zentrum gefunden. Ich war ein Insider. Ich kannte mich offiziell aus. (Rusch 2003: 151)

Neither Simon nor Hensel give the impression that they were as successful in finding their feet. Simon, in particular, cannot forget Felix's tragic failure, which contrasts so starkly with Rusch's allegedly symbolic triumph in Paris.

In common with the texts of her two contemporaries, however, *Meine freie deutsche Jugend* makes a significant contribution to combating the wholesale *Abwicklung* of her GDR childhood, all the more potent perhaps in Rusch's case due to the persecution she suffered. By virtue of the self-deprecating humour underpinning her narrative, she too conveys the impression that it was possible, even for her, to lead a relatively normal life moved and shaken by similar preoccupations as contemporaries in the West. In this regard, her account complements those of Simon and Hensel, as between them they muster an impression of what it was like to be a child in the GDR and how it was possible to live a relatively normal existence. But one must stress that these texts do not embody or promote any sense of *Ostalgie*. How could Rusch, of all people, wish the GDR back? In "Die Rede", she reveals how she was invited to hold the school-leavers' speech in June 1990. Initially reluctant, she agreed to write the text with her friend Robert, as it afforded the opportunity to settle some scores:

Wir konnten uns endlich rächen für Lügen, Angst und Verrat. Für alltägliche Korruption. Für jahrelanges Abrichten, Rechenschaftsberichte, für Fahnenappelle, Winkelemente und Kampflieder. Für FDJ-Studienjahr und Bildungsbeschneidung. Wir konnten mit ihnen abrechnen. (Rusch 2003: 99-100)

But they opt instead to take stock of their generation's experiences of the GDR as "die letzten echten Osis" and "die ersten neuen Wessis" (Rusch 2003: 101): "Drei Monate bevor sich alles für immer auflöste, nahmen wir doch noch die Identität an, die wir so sehr von uns gewiesen hatten" (Rusch 2003: 100). Consequently her speech provides a balanced, nuanced picture of the GDR as "nicht nur Spitzel und Karrieristen, auch unsere Familien und Freunde lebten hier" (Rusch 2003: 100). This is precisely what her book achieves, as the programmatic title underlines and Wolfgang Hilbig avers in his *Nachwort*: "Es ist ein Buch mit Geschichten, die endgültig [...] aus dem vielbeklagten Jammertal der Ostdeutschen herausführen" (Rusch 2003: 157).

Together with Simon and Hensel, Rusch contends that it is the everyday dimension of GDR life that should not be forgotten, nor consigned summarily to the rubbish bin as

irredeemably contaminated. These young authors cannot be accused of nostalgia, as each text contains an inherent critique of the GDR, but they do seek to restore a differentiated picture of the country of their childhood by putting their experiences in context. Naturally, as with all autobiography, the validity of their subjective descriptions of childhood experience might be interrogated and challenged. And yet, Hensel’s *Zonenkinder* became a bestseller and Rusch’s *Meine freie deutsche Jugend* was nominated for the *Deutscher Bücherpreis* in the spring of 2004.⁶ Moreover, one cannot fail to notice the degree of mutual corroboration that emerges from the three texts under scrutiny, despite some fundamental differences in the detail and narrative approach, with Simon’s reconstruction of her friend’s life, Hensel’s attempt to define a generation and Rusch’s anecdotes. In particular, it is what they each reveal about the psychological readjustments forced upon their generation, rather than the individual memories of childhood, that is so intriguing. For they tread a path between the post-*Wende* extremes, that is, between the generalising perspectives of *Abwicklung* and *Ostalgie*. In spite of the economic and social pressures that have ravaged parts of the new *Bundesländer* since 1990, it is clearly wrong to claim that the GDR was a socialist paragon in comparison. Yet it is equally remiss to reject everything that came from the East as necessarily flawed or inferior. In rehabilitating childhood memories, none of the authors is pining for a lost idyll. Hensel, for example, defines her everyday ethos as “nicht auffallen und immer Durchschnitt bleiben” (Hensel 2002: 91), and even more tellingly casts doubt on the “Märchen vom höheren Gemeinschaftsgefühl im Osten” (Hensel 2002: 106) – a common element of *Ostalgie*. Simon too reveals the pressure that came to bear on friendships once the GDR fell apart, speaking from bitter personal experience of her increasing alienation from Felix. On the other hand, Hensel is equally scornful of those who insist that nothing should remain of the land of her birth: “Ansonsten hatte ich mein bisheriges Leben so schlecht nun auch wieder nicht gefunden, dass gleich alles anders werden musste” (Hensel 2002: 97). Unsurprisingly, this same attitude is implicit in the accounts of Simon and Rusch.

In their different ways, each author is motivated by the desire to place their childhood memories in a more accurate, detailed context than has hitherto been deemed

⁶ It is worth noting that *Zonenkinder* was published in English by PublicAffairs in November 2004 with the title *After the Wall*.

acceptable in the new Germany, and thereby to counteract the impact of *Abwicklung*. They wish to celebrate the differences that still exist, which need not be seen as an oppositional or nostalgic stance, merely a realistic one based on personal experience. For, as Konrad Jarausch explains, “instead of residing in a single unified definition, a nation’s self-conception is [...] more likely to be found in the competing discourses about what it ought to be” (Jarausch 1997:5). Reflecting on the first decade of reunification, Jana Hensel, Jana Simon and Claudia Rusch have defined what it is to be a ‘Zonenkind’, with their specific perspective on the collapse of the GDR and the transformation processes that Germany has undergone as a consequence. In addition, they have contributed to the ongoing exploration of the GDR’s legacy that does not just revolve around the SED, the Stasi, Wandlitz or *Ostalgie*. It also involves the memories and experiences of people living ordinary lives. In their examination of post-*Wende* developments in German society, Helga Welsh, Andreas Pickel and Dorothy Rosenberg make some persuasive observations about the reasons for this “reawakening of eastern German consciousness”:

Eastern German identity is not necessarily embraced as a way of opting out of the new Germany, of celebrating cultural distinctiveness, or of waxing nostalgic about a paradise lost. From a functional point of view it may instead be a constructive response: an Eastern German self-consciousness does not question the rules of the game in any fundamental sense but rather facilitates integration by empowering individuals and collective actors in the ongoing conflicts of interest, many of them along East-West lines.

The reawakening of eastern German consciousness has grown out of recognition that the two societies are distinct, that the West cannot or at any rate should not simply be copied, and that in addition to undeniable successes, the attempt to do so has created a wealth of serious and long-term problems. Growing support for an eastern German identity can be understood as a demand for recognition of these basic facts. (Welsh et al 1997: 135)

In their different ways, Jana Simon, Jana Hensel and Claudia Rusch have made important contributions to this continuing process of transformation and integration, where the eastern German perspective they seek to define should be viewed as natural and distinctive, yet neither retrogressive nor intransigent.

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Biodata

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